Developing Community Trails:

Brainstorms and the Power of Policy

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The Story

Flying into Seattle International Airport one day in 1988, John Amberton* looked out of his window and fixed his gaze on a utility corridor far below. It would make a perfect trail, he thought, with its wide swatch of clear land. His mind began to process the possibility; 15 years later, his vision would become a reality.

Planning community trails often begins with such moments of revelation. In another community, Galen Watson's* brainstorm ensured that land devastated by a flood would eventually help fill the need for a trail and recreational area. With help from flood buy out programs, he would go on to develop a trail that enhanced the community. Elsewhere, members of another citizen group, Friends for Fitness in West Hawaii, dreamt that an abandoned airport could become a place to walk for exercise.

These revelations, however, were simply first steps in a long line of events that led to the actual development of trails. What started as simple ideas evolved into complex webs of funding, land acquisition, and other policies. But the ultimate results, in all cases, were community assets that allow residents to be physically active—the creation of places for recreation and social interaction, and in some areas, places for active transportation to and from work or shopping.

This is a study of successful policies that created six multi-use trails across the United States: a one mile trail in a rural Missouri town; a five-and-a-half mile rail trail in suburban Massachusetts; a six mile river trail in South Carolina; a three mile trail in southeastern Seattle; a one mile trail on old airport grounds in West Hawaii, and a three mile trail in Durham, North Carolina.

Lessons Learned

Though the specifics of each trail varied, the challenges faced by planners and invested parties were often similar. First, trail planning and policy change or development involved many individuals and organizations—such as private funders, city, state and federal organizations, advocacy organizations, community residents, engineers, planners, local businesses, and utility companies. The diversity of the partners added complexity to the necessary tasks of reaching compromises, keeping timelines, and even speaking the same professional language.

A cyclist rides the Chief Sealth Trail in Southeastern Seattle, WA.

Workers build the McKenzie Creek Trail in Piedmont, MO.

A common stumbling block was provisions for trail maintenance. Because such work requires yearly funding, partners must work together to decide who will fund and implement maintenance. Positive partnerships among groups and individuals were a common theme in successful policy change.

Another challenge across several of the trail sites was the time it took for the policy process to run its course. Many trail plans were presented at least a decade before they were actually built. Perseverance is often the key to success.

A third challenge in developing community trails was the difficulty in getting people and organizations to view the trail as an important and positive feature in the community. Whether their lack of support was due to safety concerns or funding priorities, addressing the opposition was essential in policy initiation or change.

Replicating Results

Policy development for trail development requires a team of players that includes governmental and private agencies as well as community groups. The trick, it seems, is in balancing these groups' different motives to accomplish a shared goal. Trail development for a transportation planner may mean reducing traffic congestion. For a public health practitioner, it may mean more people becoming physically active.

Communities of all types can benefit from the development of multi-use trails. Doing so requires seizing windows of opportunity, finding positive partnerships, and being committed to the cause. Even though there may be policy barriers to trail development, many policies change over time or new ones are created to accommodate shifting community needs. As active living becomes more integrated into our culture, community trails can increasingly provide access to venues for physical activity, recreation, and active transportation.

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**Note: John Amberton and Galen Watson are pseudonyms.*